

Online Dictionaries of English Slang

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Abstract

This paper presents a range of online dictionaries of English slang, and considers their search facilities, coverage and reliability, as well as practical factors involved in setting up and maintaining these resources. A selection of slang terms from Britain and the United States is used to explore gaps and trends in the dictionaries' contents. The paper concludes by arguing that the best user-edited dictionaries have high editorial aspirations, and that even the worst can make a useful contribution to our knowledge of contemporary slang, which changes so quickly that a paper dictionary cannot possibly keep pace. *Urban Dictionary* undoubtedly has the most extensive coverage, but other sites challenge it in a number of respects.

Keywords: slang, online lexicography

Introduction

In recent years, the history of lexicography has been overturned by technological developments, both in making source materials more readily available and in providing new modes of publication. Online dictionaries offer possibilities to users and compilers far beyond those of traditional publishing formats. The *Oxford English Dictionary* online, for example, is now updated on a regular basis, not only with new sections of the alphabet, but also with words of particular interest to its users at the time. Researchers can also use the online edition to explore the history of the dictionary itself, and second edition entries are maintained alongside third edition entries to facilitate this. The third edition of the *OED* no longer appears to discriminate against widely-used slang terms, but clearly cannot document the meaning and use of every ephemeral term used within small groups of speakers everywhere in the English-speaking world. This suggests that there is still a place for specialized slang lexicography, and this paper asks how far online slang dictionaries take advantage of the possibilities of online publication while maintaining high standards of lexicography.

Static and dynamic online dictionaries

Online slang dictionaries can be categorized along a spectrum from the static to the dynamic. The static end of the spectrum is occupied by text-based lists. Typically they offer no opportunity for user-input and remain

unedited after their initial online publication. Occasionally they include live links in place of cross-references, or are divided by letter and accessed by clicking on the appropriate part of the alphabet, but otherwise their only advantage over paper publication is (for the user) that they are freely available and (for the lexicographer) that no tiresome obstacles are put in the way by reviewers or proof-readers.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are dynamic online dictionaries. These take full advantage of the possibilities offered by internet publication by including live links, illustrations, sound files, maps, and so on. They are also updated on a regular basis, frequently encourage user-input, and generally provide statistics about the use of the website or of the terms listed.

This paper will discuss six online slang dictionaries selected to illustrate different points on this spectrum from static to dynamic. These are *Regency Slang* by Robert and June Whitworth, the *Peak English Slang Dictionary* by Distance Learning Inc., the *Rap Dictionary* by Patrick Atoon and Niels Janssen, the *Online Dictionary of Playground Slang* by Chris Lewis, *A Dictionary of Slang* by Ted Duckworth, *Urban Dictionary* by Aaron Peckham, and *The Online Slang Dictionary* by Walter Rader. URLs are listed in the reference section below. All were accessed during the last week of October 2009, except where otherwise specified.

The dictionaries

Regency Slang

Regency Slang is the most static of the lists discussed here. It forms part of a website called *Prints George*, which offers a light-hearted introduction to various aspects of life during the period of George IV's regency (1811-20) to promote "genuine reproductions" of maps and illustrations from the period as well as jigsaw puzzles and craft packs. Entries are presented in a table with two columns: one for headword and the other for definition. A representative entry reads:

able-wackets blows given on the palm of the hand with a twisted handkerchief [*sic*], instead of a ferula; a jocular punishment among seamen, who sometimes play at cards for wackets, the loser suffering as many strokes as he has lost games.

This is probably reproduced either from Grose (1811) or the related dictionary by Egan (1823), but there is no additional editorial input. These, and three other Regency texts are acknowledged as the dictionary's sources. No requests are made for corrections or additional information on the website.

The glossary is divided by letter, although the 759 headwords available all fall in the letters A and B. There is no 'search' facility: terms can only be located by clicking on their first letter and then scrolling down the page, though the 'find' function of the user's browser can be used to expedite this process.

Peak English Slang Dictionary

Peak English Slang Dictionary is part of an *online interactive English School* offering courses, assessment, and contact with ESL students and teachers around the world. The slang glossary is supported by a 'slang forum,' and users can send one another 'slang cards' or click on 'slang of the day.' The glossary lists approximately 1,160 headwords, and a click on the headword takes the user to a definition and example(s) of use. For example:

my bad

Definition: To take the blame; acknowledge that you did something wrong.

Example: 1) Don't worry about the accident. It's my bad.
2) He's not your brother? My bad... I have difficulty remembering names.

Many entries also include a colourful cartoon, particularly towards the beginning of the alphabet and/or a sound clip of the headword and example. Synonyms and etymologies are also sometimes provided. There is no opportunity for user-input to this glossary, and no information about revision frequency or methodology.

Users can browse each letter of the alphabet, though entries are not listed alphabetically beyond the first letter (entries for Q run: *quick buck, quitting time, queer, queen, quickie, quack, quit it*). They can also ‘pick a category,’ ranging from *acronyms* and *insults* to *sex* and *sports*, although some categories (e.g. *nasty*) do not generate any results. Finally, users can search for specific words. The query ‘cut,’ for instance, generates a list of all headwords including those letters: *cut a deal, cut and dry, cut it out, cut it, cut the cheese, executive summary, cutting-edge, cut corners*. Because a small font is used, a great many headwords fit on a single screen, and the user can thus easily locate the correct definition if it is available.

The Online Dictionary of Playground Slang

The *Online Dictionary of Playground Slang* website includes eight separate, but sometimes overlapping, dictionaries: of playground slang, ghastly games, buzzwords, hymns and arias, songs and rhymes, gay slang, tongue twisters, and nursery rhymes. The playground slang dictionary was the first, and the website lists 3,603 terms in this collection. The other lists appear to

have arisen as a result of interest by users or the compiler in concentrating on a new area of research. Users were able to submit terms for inclusion and these were vetted before appearing online, but it is no longer possible to contribute to the dictionaries. The site includes targeted advertisements via ‘Amazon Recommends’ and Google’s ‘AdSense,’ but has not been updated since June 2007. Lewis also published a paperback dictionary based on the website (Lewis 2003).

Entries typically include a usage label, definition, examples, and indication of dates of use and/or source. For example:

all mouth and trousers

colloq.

Describes someone who claims to be able to carry out tasks and duties but does not have the necessary skills [*sic*] and abilities to perform to a satisfactory standard. For example. “Johnny said he was going to beat rhe [*sic*] shit out of Will after the game but it turns out he’s all mouth and trousers - Will gave him the finest kicking of hiso [*sic*] life!”.

Source: circa current, UK

The authority behind the ‘circa current’ and ‘UK’ labels is not clear, but these appear to be the work of the site editor, sometimes with input from

other dictionary users who have queried the editor's designations. Entries are dated, and many provide live links to synonymous terms.

After clicking on one of the dictionaries, the user can browse the dictionary alphabetically, choose from a list of recently added terms, or perform a search. The search 'cut' located 32 results in the playground slang dictionary, organized largely, but not entirely, alphabetically. Entries including *cut* in the headword were numbered 4, 8-16, 21, 26 and 29. Searches thus produce a fair amount of background noise, but for a less common word this has the advantage of enabling the user to locate examples of use where no definition is available.

It is also possible to search all eight dictionaries on the website simultaneously, though this option is not available at the home page located by Google. From the highest level page located by Google, the user has to click on one of the dictionaries and then click back to 'the main page' to locate this option. A search for 'cut' located 56 results, listed separately for each dictionary. The level of background noise is the same as in the single dictionary search, with the additional requirement of clicking on each dictionary name: terms including *cut* in the definition are listed alongside those with *cut* in their headword. It is thus easiest to search this dictionary by browsing.

A Dictionary of Slang

A Dictionary of Slang includes a number of features that ought to be standard in online slang dictionaries: a short account of the remit of the dictionary (this one concentrates on usage in the United Kingdom), particularly with reference to the boundary between slang and dialect or colloquialisms, remarks about the difficulty of providing authoritative dates and etymologies for slang terms, a reminder that some of the terms listed might have become obsolete, and an apology for any offence caused by the contents of the word-list. There is also quite a lengthy bibliography, with links to Amazon for books still in print, and a list of abbreviations used in the dictionary. Links are provided to other online slang sites (of which there are many), and a 'news' page documents a few technological developments and changes in editorial policy. Advertisements are included on the home page of the dictionary, but these appear to be permanent and untargeted. A counter logs over 8 million visits to the site since April 1998, and the word-list contains 5,948 headwords, some of which have several definitions.

Users can submit by sending an email through the site to its owner, and are asked to "give the meaning of the expression, and if possible, an example of it in use," as well as to indicate where in the United Kingdom the expression was heard. Only the editor can put material online, and it appears in a table format similar to that found in the *Regency Dictionary*:

nick *Verb.* 1. To arrest. E.g. “Right Mr Hall, please step out of the car, you’re nicked for speeding.”

2. To steal.

3. To take, have. E.g. “Can I nick a cigarette until later? I’ll buy a packet when I get my wages.”

Noun. A police station.

Adj. Quality. Usually heard in the expressions, good nick or bad nick. E.g. “For that much money, you’d expect it to be in good nick.”

Examples of use, etymologies, and usage labels are sometimes provided.

Parts of speech are generally included, but are sometimes inaccurate, as in the designation of the final usage in this example.

Users can browse alphabetically or enter a search term in a box powered by atomz.com. Search tips are offered and the search engine offers a number of options: ‘any word,’ ‘all words,’ ‘exact phrase,’ or ‘sound-alike matching.’ Sound-alike matching ought to be particularly useful for slang searches, where spellings are not formalized, but is less necessary in a dictionary with a high level of consistency engendered by single-editor control. Some context is provided for each result, enabling the user to determine whether or not to follow it up. Results can be ordered by score or date, and the user can also select how many results are displayed. Users can narrow their searches further by electing to search ‘body,’ ‘title,’

‘description,’ ‘keywords,’ ‘anywhere,’ ‘alternate text,’ or ‘URL,’ though some trial and error is necessary to determine what these different fields include. Using both ‘cut’ and ‘mad’ as test search-terms, searches in the ‘body’ and ‘anywhere’ field yielded the same number of results in each case. All other searches yielded no results.

The Rap Dictionary

The *Rap Dictionary* describes itself as “the oldest and ultimate resource for looking up hip-hop slang,” and traces its origins to a text-based glossary circulated in the newsgroup alt.rap in 1992. In 1994 the list moved on to the World Wide Web, and in 2004 it was adapted for wiki technology, which allows registered users to add and edit dictionary entries. It claims “4,707 content pages,” many of which are encyclopaedic, representing an increase of about 4% since March 2009. An unusual feature of this website is that it includes a wish-list: users can request definitions for terms not already included on the site. Encyclopaedic entries often include photographs, maps, links to news stories, or tables of contents, but lexical entries are generally short and tend to include nothing more than a definition, example, and etymology (and not always all three). For example, the entry for *bling bling* reads:

noun

Bling Bling

1. Jewelry such as chains, watches, bracelets, rings, earrings, etc.

This term originated from the hip-hop artist BG aka B-Gizzle

(formerly 1 of the the [*sic*] hot boys). (White Man's definition)

Bling is described as the shinning [*sic*] light that appears on materials of great value such as jewelry, gold, silver, and platinum.

All come in colors of **Diamond, Silver, Gold, and Plat**

Bling Bling, usually used like "Yo brotha, check my bling bling!" or

"Check my blingage."

This entry has no live links, but some other lexical entries do. The site carries targeted advertisements under Google's 'AdSense' programme.

From the home page, the user can choose between four main headings: 'Dictionary,' 'Artists,' 'Some Artists,' and 'Just Some Terms.' The last two offer a selection of entries from the first two. 'Dictionary' and 'Artists' can be browsed as a whole, or their contents divided into sub-categories for browsing. Sub-categories include parts of speech for the dictionary or 'groups,' 'labels,' or 'producers' among the 'Artists.' A search for 'cut' in the 'Dictionary' section located a noun with seven separate definitions and a verb with six, including phrasal usages. It is also possible to view earlier versions of each page, which might enable future

lexicographers to chart the semantic or grammatical development of individual terms, and a slight reduction in content pages since September 2009 suggests that the editors are pruning submissions where necessary. Browseable word-lists are fully alphabetized, but only the first 200 examples are shown in each case, necessitating much clicking to reach the end of the alphabet. This means that users are more likely to use the search facility, but searches only locate headwords identical to the search term: the entries for *Mad Cowz*, *Mad Swan Blood*, and *Madhatter* are not located by a search for 'mad.' There are no '*' or '?' wildcards: these symbols are read literally, with resulting messages like "There is no page titled 'mad*'. You can create this page." A note comments that "Unsuccessful searches are often caused by searching for common words like 'have' and 'from,' which are not indexed, or by specifying more than one search term (only pages containing all of the search terms will appear in the result)." Variability in headword forms is inevitable in a multi-editor dictionary, so despite the cumbersome browsing facility, browsing remains the surest way of locating entries in this dictionary.

Urban Dictionary

Urban Dictionary claims over 4.3 million "definitions written since 1999," each of which is dated and bears the name but not the location of its author. This is an increase of approximately 7.5% since March 2009. Headwords

can be searched or browsed, and there is also a 'random' function and a 'word of the day' (online, by email or RSS readers, from mobile phones, on Twitter, Facebook, or Google Calendar). Any definition can be printed on a mug with the *Urban Dictionary* logo, and the website also promotes *Urban Dictionary* baseball caps, two paperback dictionaries containing entries from the website (Peckham 2005; Peckham 2007), and *Urban Dictionary* calendars (e.g. Peckham 2008; Peckham 2009). Links are provided to Amazon and Barnes & Noble for those items that cannot be ordered direct from the *Urban Dictionary* website. Google's 'AdSense' program inserts targeted advertisements on the home page and between the definitions for each word. Users are also encouraged to email a link to their friends or share it on del.icio.us, Facebook, or Twitter.

All users can post definitions, which are reviewed by editors before publication. However, anyone can sign up as an editor, and the review process appears to involve checking that posts observe the terms of service rather than evaluating their content. Editors can also recommend the removal of individual posts, but these decisions are reviewed by other editors before they are implemented. Contributors post competing definitions for the same sense rather than editing existing entries. These multiple definitions are available simultaneously, and are ranked according to users' clicks on an upward or downward pointing thumb. Definitions that have received the most positive responses appear at the top of the first page of results. The submission page includes fields for 'word,' 'definition,'

‘example,’ ‘tags’ (“List at least five synonyms, antonyms, related words, and misspellings”), ‘pseudonym,’ and ‘email.’ The email address does not appear online. Anything placed within square brackets in the ‘definition’ or ‘example’ field becomes a live link, and many entries also include images posted by users. The contents of user postings are inevitably varied, but three of the fifteen definitions for *hinky* will illustrate the contents of the dictionary:

Something as yet undefinable is wrong, out of place; not quite right.

There’s something hinky about the deal. (tradesman Apr 4, 2003: October 2, 2009 Urban Word of the Day)

A cop’s version of “I’ve a bad feeling about that”

An event or thing which is

1) Out of whack

2) Wrong

3) Off kilter

That porridge taste hinky to you? (Vernon Conan Chan Dec 31, 2004)

the instant of knowledge when one becomes deeply aware that there is pure evil fuckery afoot.

She knew something was hinky when her husband returned from the store without his underwear... (Lisa Shields Aug 18, 2004)

The first definition received 3,756 thumbs up, 2,211 down; the second 169 up, 56 down; and the third 173 up, 76 down. Since they all define roughly the same usage, these votes are an evaluation of the definition rather than an indication of frequency of use, but there is no exploration of what criteria users should employ, and sometimes users rank defamatory and unnecessarily obscene comments more highly than functional definitions.

The browseable word-list defaults to 'most popular words,' but the user can select an alphabetical listing of all words. Browsing is facilitated by the division of the list into first and also second letters, though the second letters ('ca,' 'cb,' etc.) are points in the whole list rather than self-contained units. For example, a user browsing for 'cut' who clicks on 'cu' will be taken to page 489 of the C words: a sequence running from *CT2004* to *cutang*, with only five entries that fall in the 'cu' range. Then it is possible to click 'next' until reaching the desired headword, or to guess how many pages ahead that result will be. Browsing is thus a labour-intensive process, but it does alert the user to the duplication of headwords. For example, over a page is dedicated to headwords beginning with *cut*. Searching is a more practical option, and here the *Urban Dictionary* website has the advantage over other slang dictionary sites in its predictive search box: as the user spells out 'cut,' the box predicts possible entries, and for long words or

phrases this can save typing time. Results for a search on ‘cut’ include a jumbled mixture of nominal, verbal, and adjectival senses spread across 113 separate submissions. The most popular of these lists five senses, each illustrated by an example of use: in only three out of five cases does the example of use match the grammatical function implied by the definition. There are a further 17 submission for *cuts*, 4 for *cutz*, 36 for *cutting*, 3 each for *cuttin* and *cuttin’*, 76 for *cutter*, and 18 for *cutters*. As has already been noted, there are a large number of other submissions beginning with *cut*. There appears to be no way to locate headwords in which *cut* is not the first word, although a Google search sometimes locates *Urban Dictionary* submissions. In summary, this uncontrolled multiple-editor dictionary is unwieldy for searching and browsing if the user’s intention is to locate all relevant submissions. However, users who just want to find a definition for a particular slang word will probably be able to locate a definition of some kind easily, no matter what spelling or grammatical form they enter in the search box.

The Online Slang Dictionary

The Online Slang Dictionary is subtitled ‘American and English Slang,’ and lists approximately 13,400 headwords (an increase of just over 100% since March 2009), of which perhaps a fifth are marked as ‘featured words,’ “edited for spelling, grammar, accuracy, etc.” by its editor, Walter Rader.

Entries that aren't 'featured' are unmediated submissions from registered users, who agree to a complicated set of terms and conditions, but apparently choose to add new entries in preference to editing existing ones, and this has created considerable duplication (e.g. *burn out*, *burnout*, *burn (one) out*, *burnt out*, *burned out*). Unregistered users can report on their own usage by choosing 'I use it,' 'No longer use it,' 'Heard it but never used it,' or 'Have never heard it.' They can also plot their position on a world map and click on a chilli pepper to register their sense of how vulgar the word is, although the instructions are not entirely unambiguous: "Vote how *vulgar* the word is – not how mean it is." For each term, links are provided in formats appropriate for pasting into webpages and wikis, and targeted advertisements are provided by Google 'AdSense.' A 'Thesaurus' function allows users to locate groups of synonyms, and links to relevant groups of terms are provided from the pages for individual words. A blog documents the addition of new terms and features since the dictionary moved to its current web-address in 2007.

The entry for *404* is one that has been edited, and thus bears Rader's stamp of approval, although it remains open for editing by registered users:

adjective

- missing or misplaced.

My car keys are 404.

by Eric B., Fort Worth, TX, USA, Aug 10 1998.

noun

- an unintelligent person; MORON, DIMWIT.

I wouldn't ask him, he's a 404.

by Walt W., Natick, Massachusetts, USA, Jun 17 2003.

- a worthless person, place, or thing.

Don't go to that bar - it's a 404.

by Robbie G., Stroud, Hampshire, UK, Feb 13 2006.

verb

- to not know or temporarily forget; DRAW A BLANK.

I'm 404ing on that.

by The Jargon File, Aug 04 2009.

origin

- 404 is the web code for "web page not found."

by Anonymous, Jul 17 2007.

Unfortunately, the user feedback functions for usage, distribution, and vulgarity do not operate on the level of individual definitions, so it is impossible to register that one uses *404* in the verbal sense but not the adjectival one. The provision of names and locations as well as dates for

each sense may explain why so many individuals have contributed to this dictionary: their contribution is immediately acknowledged and publicized.

This dictionary offers two different types of browsing: 'Browse by letter' takes the user to the first entry for the letter clicked. It presents a sequence of entries varying in number according to their length, and users can either click through each page in turn up jump ahead to locate a specific alphabetical range. 'Word list' offers an alphabetical list of all headwords, and these are grouped to facilitate movement through the list: '#, A, B,' 'C, D,' 'E, F, G,' and so on. The search facility, powered by 'Google Custom Search,' located 176 results for 'cut' including all headwords containing this sequence of letters and also all entries including this sequence anywhere in their content. Each one is headed 'The Online Slang Dictionary,' followed by a description: 'Definition of **cut**,' 'Words meaning muscular,' or 'Definition of **cut** out the robot.' There is a fair amount of background noise. For example, *custle* is located as a result for 'cut' only because *cut* occurs after *custle* in the word-list: at the bottom of each page there is an automatic link to the previous and next word. 'Definition of [search term]' is always presented first, but although a search for 'cut' locates *cuts*, *cutter*, *cutting*, and *cuttin*, these highly relevant results may well be lost among the less relevant ones. The software is intelligent enough to recognize that *cuttin* and *cuttin*' are equivalent forms and that *cutter* is a valid result for the search 'cutters,' but, as we shall see below, this does not help us with variant spellings.

Summary

Online slang lexicography offers various technological advantages over paper publication, ranging from user feedback to live links, images, and sound files, but not all online dictionaries take full (or any) advantage of these possibilities. The dictionaries discussed here illustrate a number of key points about the practical aspects of online lexicography. First, it must be financed: these websites all either host advertisements or are themselves part of an online dealership. Several have also produced paperback books and other merchandise. Second, they require considerable time for setting up and maintenance, and where this all falls on a single person other commitments or interests may prevent the completion of the entire alphabet or the maintenance and updating of existing pages. In the case of the *Regency Dictionary*, progress through the alphabet appears to have been halted; the *Online Dictionary of Playground Slang* is still available for searching but is no longer updated. The work involved in monitoring the *Rap Dictionary* was shared to ensure its survival. Third, although allowing users to post directly online reduces the workload for the web-maintainer, it introduces a range of issues that have to be spelt out in legally binding documents, particularly on the subjects of ownership, copyright, obscenity, and libel.

These dictionaries also provide evidence of the current quality of online lexicography. Allowing users to post material inevitably leads to ‘mission drift’: the instigator of the dictionary may have a clear sense of what is or is not included within the remit of the dictionary, but users will not necessarily be aware of this or in agreement with it. Even websites where only the editor can post material online are very variable in quality. As far as it is possible to tell, none of these online lexicographers has any lexicographic training, or awareness of the tasks involved in effective lexicography, and few undertake any kind of background research. This means that inflected forms often occur as headwords, spelling variants abound, definitions are often imprecise or too specific, and etymologies are generally entirely speculative.

Both *Urban Dictionary* and *The Online Slang Dictionary* set some of their entries apart by marking them as ‘word of the day’ or as approved by the editor. This foregrounds amusing entries (*Urban Dictionary*) or presents an authoritative account of a word’s usage (*OSD*). The challenge for online slang lexicography is to find a way of editing or disregarding users’ contributions without denying them the gratification of online publication and without jeopardizing the hit rate necessary for profitable advertising.

Online lexicography also adopts a different stance with regard to quantity. There is no necessity for efficiency: contributors to user-written dictionaries do not generally check what is already there before they fire off

their contribution, except perhaps in the wiki-written *Rap Dictionary*. Each of these websites makes its contents accessible in a variety of different ways, and in each case the searching and browsing facilities operate differently. Without a detailed knowledge of the types of search they can perform and the variations inherent in the material, users cannot be sure that they have located all the relevant information. Indeed, there is often so much information that most users would not want to wade through it all.

The online dictionaries' coverage

Notwithstanding their variable quality and their disparate adoption of the technological possibilities of online publication, these slang dictionaries do have one major advantage over traditional paper publications: they can be updated regularly and often. Putting aside the *Regency Dictionary*, which does not cover contemporary slang, this section will consider how far these online glossaries provide us with better slang coverage than is otherwise available.

Methodology

In order to explore the coverage of these online dictionaries, it was necessary to select a list of terms. Since the online dictionaries considered in

this section do not aim to include historical material, only terms in current use are of interest for this purpose. These were identified by cross-referring between the *OED*, Green (2008), and various dictionaries compiled by British and American students following courses on slang lexicography (Eble 1991; McCreary et al. 2001; Coleman 2005). Although terms listed in more than one of these sources were preferred, I have also used classroom discussion to determine whether terms listed in only one of these sources were widely used. Terms were selected to represent British and American usage and while some have been in use for several decades, others are relatively recent. Thirty-six terms were selected in all, twelve for which I had evidence only of British usage, twelve for which I had evidence only of American usage; and twelve for which I had evidence of usage in Britain and America. Some of these initial classifications were challenged by reference to the online dictionaries. As Tables 1-3 demonstrate, it is unlikely that increasing the sample size would have had a significant effect on the results.

Terms documented in British but not American usage

allow it interj. 'let it go; don't make a fuss' (Leicester 2008 + 2009)

arse vb 'to be motivated to do something. Usually passive and negative:

can't be arsed' (Green 2008 [1980s] + *OED* [1988— slang (chiefly Brit. and Irish English)] + Leicester 2008 + 2009)

blag vb ‘to achieve (something) with very little effort’ (*OED* [1934— Brit.

slang] + Green 2008 [1970s orig underworld] + Leicester 2005)

coolio interj. ‘great’ (Leicester 2006 + 2009)

minger n. ‘an unattractive woman or man’ (Green 2008 [1990s] + *OED*

[1992— Brit. slang (derogatory)] + Leicester 2008 + 2009)

minted adj. ‘wealthy’ (Green 2008 [1990s] + *OED* [1996— Brit. colloq.] +

Leicester 2006)

paralytic adj. ‘extremely drunk’ (Green 2008 [m19C] + *OED* [1891—

colloq.] + Leicester 2009)

scutty adj. ‘disgusting; unhygienic’ (Leicester 2008 + Green 2008 [20C])

shark n. ‘an aggressively promiscuous male’ (*OED* [related senses since

1707] + Green 2008 [1920s-1940s] + Leicester 2006)

tinternet n. ‘the internet’ (Leicester 2009 (x2))

trolled adj. ‘drunk’ (Green 2008 [1990s] + *OED* [1992— Brit. sl] +

Leicester 2008 + 2009)

wagwan interj. ‘how are you? what’s happening?’ (Green 2008 [1970s West

Indies/UK black teen] + Leicester 2008 + 2009)

Terms documented in American but not British usage

benjy n. ‘a hundred dollar note’ (Green 2008 [1980s] + *OED* [1985— US

slang] + McCreary 2001)

cheddar(r) n. ‘money’ (Green 2008 [1990s US] + McCreary 2001)

digits n. ‘telephone number’ (Green 2008 [1990s US black] + McCreary 2001)

faded adj. ‘drunk’ (Green 2008 [1980s US black/campus] + McCreary 2001)

heinous adj. ‘terrible’ (Green 2008 [1970s US campus] + Eble 1996)

indo/endo n. ‘marijuana’ (Green 2008 [1980s] + McCreary 2001)

jones vb ‘to want something very much’ (Green 2008 [1980s] + *OED* [1989— US slang] + McCreary 2001)

kegger n. ‘a beer party’ (Green 2008 [1960s US campus] + *OED* [1968— US slang] + McCreary 2001)

mung adj. ‘dirty; spoiled’ (Green 2008 [1960s US campus] + McCreary 2001)

nappy adj. ‘disgusting’ (Green 2008 [1970s US teen] + McCreary 2001)

po-po n. ‘the police’ (Green 2008 [1980s US black] + *OED* [1994— US slang] + McCreary 2001)

tubular adj. ‘excellent’ (Green 2008 [1980s US teen] + *OED* [1982— orig. and chiefly US] + Eble 1996)

Terms documented in both British and American usage

cheesy adj. ‘unfashionable; unappealing’ (*OED* [1943— colloq. (orig US)] + Green 2008 [1970s] + Eble 1996)

chillax vb ‘to relax’ (Green 2008 [2000s orig US] + Leicester 2008 + 2009)

dish n. ‘gossip’ (Green 2008 [1960s] + McCreary 2001)

fugly adj. ‘extremely ugly’ (*OED* [1988— slang derogatory] + Green 2008

[2000s orig US black] + McCreary 2001 + Leicester 2009)

gnarly adj. ‘terrible, unappealing’ or ‘great, fantastic’ (*OED* [1978— orig.

and chiefly US; 1982— orig. and chiefly US] + Green 2008 [1970s

US campus] + Leicester 2009)

hottie n. ‘an attractive person’ (*OED* [?1913— orig. Austral.] + Green 2008

[1980s US] + McCreary 2001 + Leicester 2006)

lightweight n. ‘someone who cannot hold their alcohol’ (Green 2008

[1980s] + McCreary 2001 + Leicester 2009)

merk/murk vb ‘to defeat, insult or humiliate (someone)’ (Green 2008 [2000s

US black] + Leicester 2008 + 2009)

props n. ‘respect’ (Green 2008 [1980s US black/campus] + *OED* [1990—

orig. in African-American usage] + McCreary 2001 + Leicester

2009)

random(er) n. ‘stranger’ (Green 2008 [1960s orig US campus] + *OED*

[1971— colloq. (orig. US computing)] + Eble 1996 + McCreary

2001 + Leicester 2009)

sick adj. ‘excellent’ (Green 2008 [1980s Aus/US campus] + *OED* [slang

(now esp. Skateboarding and Surfing)] + McCreary 2001 + Leicester

2009)

veg out vb ‘to relax; to do nothing’ (Green 2008 [1960s] + *OED* [1980—

slang (orig. US)] + Eble 1996 + McCreary 2001)

Results

@ @ Insert Table 1 here

@ @ Insert Table 2 here

@ @ Insert Table 3 here

The *Peak English Slang Dictionary* had the lowest hit rate (see Tables 1-3), defining only four of these terms (11%). This represents one hit per 290 of its entries. None of the terms restricted to British usage was listed, and only *digits* of the terms believed to be restricted to American usage (though evidence from one of the other dictionaries suggests that it is actually transatlantic). The other three were all widely used transatlantic slang: *cheesy*, *hottie*, and *veg out*.

The *Online Dictionary of Playground Slang* had a hit rate of 31%, representing one hit per 328 of its entries, with four additional terms included in citations but not defined in their own right, sometimes allowing the discerning user to deduce their meaning. Although it implicitly concentrates on slang used in schools in Britain, this dictionary's coverage of transatlantic slang was actually slightly better. Terms restricted to American usage were least likely to be included, but chi-squared tests confirmed that the differences between the three categories were not statistically significant.

A Dictionary of Slang scored a hit rate of 47%, representing one hit per 350 of its headwords. This dictionary explicitly focuses on slang and colloquial usage in the United Kingdom, and its coverage of terms used in British is so much better than its coverage of terms restricted to the United States ($p=0.01$) that we might consider its inclusion of *digits* and *cheddar* as indicative of their currency in the United Kingdom.

The *Rap Dictionary* is unlike the more general dictionaries, in that it restricts itself to slang associated with a single subculture. Its hit rate was 22%, representing one hit per 588 of its entries. The coverage of American and transatlantic terms is significantly better than the coverage of British terms ($p=0.01$), and this suggests that we might take its inclusion of *allow it/that* as indicative of its currency in the United States.

Urban Dictionary scored a 100% success rate, which would represent one hit per 120,316 of its entries were it not that many terms are defined more than once. In fact, it is difficult to determine how many submissions there are for single meanings of a word because all senses and grammatical categories are listed together for homographic headwords. The figures are rendered even less useful by the frequent provision of separate headwords for inflected forms and variant spellings. *Chillax*, for instance, is also defined under *chilax*, *chilaxen*, *chilaxin*, *chilaxing*, *chilaxn*, *chill-axe*, *chillaxn*, *chill-lax*, *chillak*, *chillax'n*, *chillaxe*, *chillaxed*, *chillaxen*, *chillaxes*, *chillaxin*, *chillaxin'*, *chillaxing*, *chillaxn*, *chillaxx*, *chillaxzen*, *chillaz*, and perhaps under other less predictable variants as well. However, bearing all

these reservations in mind, and taking only uninflected forms and the most obvious spelling variant into account, there are a total of 212 submissions for the 12 British slang terms: an average of 18 submissions per term. 402 submissions for the 12 American slang terms produce an average of 34 submissions per word. For the terms used on both sides of the Atlantic, there are 698 submissions in total, 58 submissions on average per term. Although hardly conclusive, this would bear further investigation. It suggests that the number of submissions for a term on *Urban Dictionary* bears some relation to its distribution and frequency of use.

The Online Slang Dictionary listed 25 of the 36 terms, a success rate of 69%, representing one hit per 536 of its entries. Its coverage of terms used in the United States is significantly better than its coverage of terms restricted to British usage ($p=0.01$), which identifies *blag*, *coolio*, *minger*, and *trollied* as possible candidates for wider usage. The mapping function on this website makes it possible to explore whether any speakers in the United States had claimed that they used these terms, and this did prove to be the case for *coolio* and *minger*, but not for *blag* or *trollied*.

Distribution

Using these dictionaries' evidence in its totality allows us to reconsider the distribution of a number of terms. Although *minger* is certainly British in origin, *Online Slang Dictionary* users report its use in the United States and with 58 submissions on *Urban Dictionary* it is better represented than most

terms restricted to British usage. The inclusion of *allow it/that* in *Urban Dictionary* does not provide any evidence of its distribution, but it is also found in the *Rap Dictionary*. It is more likely to have originated in Black American usage and spread to Britain than the other way round. 37

submissions for *coolio* on *Urban Dictionary* support the evidence from *The Online Slang Dictionary* that it is not just restricted to Britain.

Among the terms originally classified as restricted to the United States, it appears that *chedda(r)*, *digits*, *po-po*, and possibly *jones* also have (or have had) some currency in British slang. This emphasizes the fluidity of slang usage in the age of the internet: British and American English have long acquired terms from one another through music, film, and television, but the internet has sped up the process. Where once a British slang term might have remained obscure to an American teenager (and vice versa), its meaning is now available at the click of a mouse, making its passage into wider usage smoother than ever. Printed dictionaries labelling terms as ‘US’ or ‘Brit’ are unlikely to remain accurate for long, which begs the question of whether it is possible to use the ‘US’ and ‘Brit’ labels with any confidence or to construct dictionaries of ‘British’ or ‘American’ slang as separate entities.

Meaning

Although the definitions in these online dictionaries are generally not accurately or carefully written, they can provide useful source material to a

discerning lexicographer. For example, the term *merk/murk* appears to be used only with the sense ‘to defeat, insult or humiliate (someone)’ in British English at the moment, but reference to the various online definitions suggests that it is used with the sense ‘to kill; to murder’ in the United States, and that the sense of ‘to defeat’ was originally restricted in reference to computer games, where defeating someone generally does involve killing them. This appears to be the context in which the term passed into British usage, where it has acquired a broader meaning that is not reflected in the United States.

Origins

Although these dictionaries could not be used as an example of scholarly lexicography, they do sometimes provide clues that a more discerning etymologist could follow up. For example, both *Urban Dictionary* entries for *tinternet* suggest that it represents a stereotypical Northern British elision of ‘the internet.’ One suggests that it was popularized by Peter Kay, a comedian from Bolton in Lancashire, and Kay’s official website does include an admonition to “get on t’internet.”

Conclusions

The online slang dictionaries discussed in this paper are extremely variable in content, functionality, quality, and coverage. They do not generally fulfil the requirements of traditional dictionary users in terms of content, quality or reliability. They can, however, serve a number of functions that traditional dictionaries cannot: at their best, they offer dated evidence of use; define the most current usages; and document debates between slang users. They also offer information that slang lexicographers can use as source material to determine frequency, distribution, origins, and semantic development. They are not by any means efficient lexicons, but for anyone seeking the meaning of a current slang term, these online slang dictionaries are the obvious place to start. Sometimes quantity delivers where quality cannot, but the ideal online slang dictionary would bring professional standards of lexicography to users' contributions without alienating enthusiastic but untutored informants.

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Table 1. Terms documented in British but not American usage.

	Peak	ODPS	DS	Rap	Urban	OSD
allow it/that	n	n	n	y	y	n
arsed	n	n	y	n	y	n
blag	n	n	y	n	y	y
coolio	n	y	y	n	y	y
minger	n	y	y	n	y	y
minted	n	n	y	n	y	n
paralytic	n	n	y	n	y	n
scutty	n	n	n	n	y	n
shark	n	y	n	n	y	n
tinternet	n	n	n	n	y	n
trolled	n	n	y	n	y	y
wagwan	n	n	y	n	y	n
British words	0	3	8	1	12	4
	0%	33%	67%	8%	100%	33%

Table 2. Terms documented in American but not British usage.

	Peak	ODPS	DS	Rap	Urban	OSD
benjy	n	n	n	n	y	n
chedda(r)	n	y	n	y	y	y
digits	y	y	n	n	y	y
faded	n	n	n	n	y	y
heinous	n	n	n	n	y	y
indo/endo	n	n	n	y	y	y
jones	n	n	y	n	y	y
kegger	n	n	n	n	y	y
mung	n	n	n	n	y	n
nappy	n	n	n	n	y	y
po-po	n	y	y	y	y	y
<u>tubular</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>y</u>	<u>y</u>
American words	1	3	2	3	12	10
	8%	25%	17%	25%	100%	83%

Table 3. Terms documented in both British and American usage.

	Peak	ODPS	DS	Rap	Urban	OSD
cheesy	y	n	y	n	y	y
chillax	n	n	y	y	y	y
dish	n	n	n	n	y	y
fugly	n	y	y	n	y	y
gnarly	n	y	y	n	y	y
hottie	y	y	y	y	y	y
lightweight	n	n	n	n	y	y
merk/murk	n	n	n	y	y	n
props	n	n	n	y	y	y
random(er)	n	n	n	n	y	y
sick	n	y	y	n	y	y
veg (out)	y	y	y	n	y	y
Transatlantic	3	5	7	4	12	11
words	25%	42%	58%	33%	100%	92%